THE NATURE AND NECESSITY OF CONVERSION - OCT. 7, 1962 ACTS 3:1-21

THERE ARE A FEW ASPECTS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH THAT ARE GROSSLY MISUNDERSTOOD: AND OUT OF MIS UNDERSTANDING HAVE COME ERROR AND SUPERSITTION. PERHAPS THE MOST PREVALENT OF THESE IS THAT BODY OF DEFINITIONS THAT MAKES UP OUR CONCEPTION OF CONVERSION. IF THERE IS ONE SINGLE WORD ABOUT CHRISTIANITY THAT EMBARRASSES US IT IS CONVERSION. WE SHY AWAY FROM IT, WE IGNORE IT AS IF IT WERE NOT AT ALL A PART OF OUR FAITH, WE ARE UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN SOMEONE BEGINS TO TALK ABOUT IT, GENERALLY SPEAKING THE MAJOR STRAND OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY CONSCIOUSLLY AND INTENTIONALLY NELECTS TO MENTION THE WORD.

AND YET FOR SOME, MYSELF AMONG THEM, THIS SITUATION IS NOT AT ALL SATISFACTORY. IT DOESN'T REQUIRE MUCH READING OF THE BIBLE TO DISCOVER THAT CONVERSION IS MENTIONED THEREIN, QUITE PROMINANTLY AND EMPHATICALLY AT THAT. IN OUR SCRIPTURE LESSON THIS MORNING, A PORTION OF PETER'S SERMON, WE FIND THE WORDS "REPENT AND TURN AGAIN, THAT YOUR SINS MAY BE BLOTTED OUT." THE CONTENT OF JOHN THE BAPTISTS' MESSAGE WAS "REPENT BE CONVERTED, BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL." IN MATTHEW 18:3 WE READ " UNLESS YOU TURN AND BECOME LIKE CHILDREN, YOU WILL NEVER ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN." JOHN 3:3 SAYS "UNLESS ON ONE IS BORN ANEW, HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD." PAUL PUTS IT PLAINLY IN II COR. 5:17 "IF ANYONE IS IN CHRIST, HE IS A NEW CREATION: THE OLD HAS PASSED AWAY, BEHOLD, THE NEW XXXXXX HAS COME." ALL OF THESE PASSAGES AND MANY MORE LIKE THEM CONTAIN A COMMON NOTE: THAT A CHRISTIAN MUST REPENT, OR TURN, THAT THE OLD MUST BE SLOUGHED OFF.

THAT AT THE BEGINNING OF A CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE THERE MUST BE A WILLFUL MOVEMENT. THIS IS WHAT WE CALL CONVERSION. REGARDLESS OF HOW WE DRESS IT UP, OR DISGUISE IT, CONVERSION IS THE HEART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MESSAGE.

ALL OUR SUSPICIONS AND UNEASINESS ABOUT CONVERSION ARE NOT ENTIRELY UNFOUNDEE HOWEVER. IT IS NO EXCUSE, BUT WE HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT FORCED TO REACT AGAINST A POPULAR MEANING OF CONVERSION THAT IS DIFFICULT TO CALL BIBLICAL. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CONVERSION OCCURSXXXXA ALWAYS, THROUGH AN ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS CHRIST: EITHER IN PERSON OR IN THE PREACHING OF HIS DISCIPLES. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF PENTECOST, WHICH WAS ANOTHER THING ENTIrely, WE DON'T HEAR MUCH ABOUT EMOTIONAL, CONVULSIVE CONVERSIONS. AS A MATTER OF FACT, THEY OCCUR RATHER QUIETLY. JESUS TALKS WITH A MAN AND THE MAN REACTS EITHER POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY. JESUS APPROACHES A TAX COLLECTOR'S TABLE AND TO THE MAN SITTING BEHIND IT SAYS "FOLLOW ME" AND MATTHEW BECOMES A DISCIPLE. I WILL RETURN TO SIMON PETER, BUT HE TOO EXEMPLIFIES/? NEW TESTAMENT CONVERSION. TO HIM AND HIS BROTHERS JESUS SAID, "FOLLOW ME AND I'LL MAKE YOU FISHERS OF MEN" AND THEY FOLLOWED HIM. NO SHOUTING AND SCREAMING, JUST SIMPLE OBEDIANCE AS THE FIRST STEP IN A LIFE OF DISCIPLESHIP. WHEREVER HE WENT, WHEREEVER HE WAS PRESENT IN THE PROCLAIMED WORD, MEN REACTED TO HIS AUTHORITY. THEY EITHER FOLLOWED OR WALKED AWAY, THERE WAS ALWAYS SOME KIND OF REACTION: A POSITIVE REACTION WAS CONVERSION.

SOMEHOW, FROM THIS QUIETLY PROFOUND ENCOUNTER, HAS GROWN A WHOLE STRING OF EXCESSES THAN ARE IDENTIFIED WITH CONVERSION. A CENTURY AGO OUR NATION EXPERIENCED WHAT IS CALLED THE GREAT AWAKENING. ALONG WITH THE EXPANDING FRONTIER AND A NEW WAY OF LIFE, WAS BORN A NEW KIND OF PREACHING. NOW WHEN IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY DID PREACHERS OF THE WORD OF GOD ACT AS THE FRONTIER PREACHERS. THEY POUNDED THEIR BIBLE, THEY FORSOOK THEOLOGY FOR HELL, FIRE AND BRIMSTONE, THEY PREACHING IN WORDS OF ONE SYLLABLE, MAKING THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST SOMETHING IT HAD NEVER BEEN BEFORE. IT WAS A HARD AND FAST RELIGION, PERFECTLY SUITABLE TO THE WAY OF FRONTIER LIFE. DESCRIPTIONS OF CAMP MEETINGS AND REVIVALS ARE SO FANTASTIC AS TO BE HARDLY CREDIBLE. MEN BARKED LIKE DOGS, IN FITS OF EMOTION PEOPLE QUIVERED AND SHOOK LIKE EPILEPTICS AND WOMEN FAINTED. GRADUALLY THIS NEW RELIGION WORKED ITS WAY BACK INTO THE METROPOLITAN CENTERS IN THE EAST AND THEN IT CREATED A REACTION. SINCLAIR LEWIS VOICED THE MOST DISGUSTED SIDE OF THE REACTION IN HIS CONTROVERSIAL NOVEL "ELMER GANTRY." ALTHOUGH THE CHARACTERS ARE PURELY FICTITIOUS, THE REVIVALISTIC, EMOTION LADDEN PITCH OF GANTRY IS A FAIRLY ACCURATE DESCRIPTION OF THIS TYPE OF PREACHING. SINCLAIR LEWIS DESPISED THIS PROSTITUTION OF MAN'S REASON, AND MANY A PROTESTANT CHURCH MAN BEGAN TO WONDER.

TODAY, UNFORTUNATELY, WE STILL THINK OF CONVERSION IN THE TERMS CREATED IN 19th CENTURY REVIVALISM. AND, TO BE SURE, IT STILL EXISTS UNDER THE NAME OF CHRISTIANITY IN MANY PLACES. THE RESULT OF THIS EMOTIONAL CONVERSION MOVEMENT HAS BEEN A REACTION

IN THE OTHER DIRECTIONBY LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY. IN REACTING AGAINST THIS TYPE OF CONVERSION EXPERIENCE, THE CHURCH HAS COMPLETELY AVOIDED ANY MENTION OF CONVERSION, UNTIL TODAY IT IS A FORGOTTEN ASPECT OF THE FAITH.

IN THIS WE HAVE GON TOO FAR. BY REJECTING AN IMPORTANT PART OF N.T. CHRISTIANITY WE HAVE WEAKENED THE CHURCH. BY ALLOWING CONVERSION TO BE THE SOLE POSSESSION OF THE RADICAL CONSERVATIVES WE HAVE LOWERED OUR GUARD UNTIL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP HAS LOST MUCH OF ITS ORIGINAL MEANING. INSTEAD OF BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST WHICH ASSISTS IN THE CONVERSION OF PERSONS TO CHRISTIANITY, THE CHURCH HAS BECOME THE PLACE WHERE CHRISTIANITY IS DISCUSSED ACADEMICALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY IN REACTINGTO DECISIONS MADE WITHOUT REASON, WE REQUIRE NO REAL DECISION AT ALL. INSTEAD OF BEING THE PLACE WHERE PEOPLE ENCOUNTER JESUS CHRIST AND REACT TO HIM, WE HAVE MADE THE CHURCH INTO A CLUB, A FORUM FOR RELIGIOUS DISCUSSION. MEMBERSHIP IN MOST CHURCHES IS ACQUIRED WITH LITTLE EFFORT AND NO DECISION. THE CHURCH HANDS OUT THE SACRAMENTS OF BAPTISM AND COMMUNION WITHOUT INSISTING THAT A PERWON WHO CALLS HIMSELF CHRISTIAN COME TO GRIPS WITH THE MEANING OF THE WORD. IN SHORT, MODERN CHRISTIANITY HAS BECOME CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CONVERSION. AND THE RESULT IS A CHURCH BUSILY CONTINUING SOMETHING IT NEVER REALLY BEGAN.

WHAT THEN IS CONVERSION? WHAT ROLE MUST IT PLAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH? LIKE ANYTHING ELSE OF THIS MAGNITUDE, IT IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO BE SPECIFIC. SURELY

CONVERSION MEANS MANY DIFFERENT THINGS. FOR SOME AN EXPERIENCE AT A BILLY GRAHAM CRUSADE HAS BEEN A TRUE CONVERSION. SOME CAN PINPOINT THE TIME WHEN THEY TURNED TO CHRIST (ALTHOUGH I MUST ADMIT TO SOME SUSPICIONS IN THESE CASES). AND OF COURSE THERE ARE MANY CHRISTIANS WHO SEE CONVERSION AS A LIFE LONG PROCESS OF SLOWLY TURNING TO CHRIST. We make a mistake when we allow it to be less important.

IN ITS SHORTEST DEFINITION CONVERSION MEANS A DECISION. WHETHER ONCE OR CONTINUALLY, IT MEANS A DECISION THAT RESULTS IN A TURNING AWAY FROM SELF AND TO GOD. WE HAVE A LOT OF TROUBLE WITH THE WORD DECISION. IF ANYONE OF US WERE ASKED "ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?" THE ANSWER WOULD BE OF COURSE. BUT WERE WE TO BE ASKED ABOUT A DECISION FOR CHRIST WE WOULD EITHER BE EMBARRASSED OR START AN ARGUMENT. IF I HAD TO BOIL THIS SERMON DOWN INTO ONE CONCISE SENTENCE IT WOULD BE "BEING A CHRISTIAN AND MAKING A DECISION FOR CHRIST ARE SYNONOMOUS." THERE SIMPLY IS NO SUCH THING AS CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT A DECISION--~~XHXXX~~ THERE IS NO CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CONVERSION!

A DECISION FOR CHRIST IS NOT THE ONLY KIND OF DECISION THAT STICKS IN OUR THROATS. IT HAS BECOME OBVIOUS IN RECENT YEARS THAT WE ARE SIMPLY NOT A VERY DECISIVE PEOPLE. THERE IS NOTHING WE HATE MORE THAN TO MAKE DECISIONS, TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED. WE ARE FAST BECOMING A NATION OF FENCE SITTERS. THIS INDECISIVENESS HAS ALL SORTS OF IMPLICATIONS CULTURALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND POLITICALLY. THE WHOLE INDUSTRY OF

PROFESSIONAL ADVERTISING IS AIMED AT THE ALL AMERICAN DESIRE TO HAVE SOMEONE MAKE OUR DECISIONS FOR US. BOOK CLUBS DICTATE WHAT WE READ, RECORD CLUBS WHAT MUSIC WE PREFER. POLITICAL ANALYSTS ARE SHOWING REAL CONCERN THAT THE TWO PARTY SYSTEM MAY BE FLOUNDERING BECAUSE PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO DECIDE. THE BEATNIK OR EXISTENTIALIST MOVEMENT IN OUR NATION IS A FORM OF REBELLION AGAINST REACTION TO THIS CULTURAL "WISHY WASHYNESS." "HERE I STAND" SYS THE EXISTENTIALIST, "DRESSING AND ACTING THE WAY I PLEASE." THE LINE FROM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET "TO BE, OR NOT TO BE" ASKS THE QUESTION THAT MUST BE ASKED OF EVERY AMERICAN. WILL I FACE LIFE SQUARELY AND MAKE MY OWN DECISIONS OR WILL I HIDE FROM INSECURITY AND ANXIETY IN THE PROTECTIVE ANESTHESIA OF TELEVISION?

AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY HAS SUCCUMBED TO THIS CULTURAL INDECISIVENESS: ADD THIS TO OUR REACTION AGAINST EMOTIONAL CONVERSION AND YOU GET A CHURCH AND RELIGION THAT FLOURISHES ON INDECISIVENESS. WE ARE TO THE POINT NOW WHERE IT IS CONSIDERED BAD TASTE TO BECOME TOO INVOLVED IN RELIGION: TO BE TOO DECISIVE. LIFE IS MUCH SIMPLER AND EASIER WITHOUT BEING DECISIVE. AND CHRISTIANITY IS MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE WITHOUT HAVING TO DECIDE ABOUT ANYTHING. IN OUR TIME, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE PREFER "RELIGION IN GENERAL" - THE SORT OF RELIGION DISPLAYED IN HOLLYWOOD'S BUNGLING RELIGIOUS MOVIES, THE SORT THAT SELLS WELL ON THE NEWSTAND. A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THIS "RELIGION-in-GENERAL" IS A

LITTLE BOOK EDITED AND COMPILED BY EDWARD R. MURROW ENTITLED "THIS I BELIEVE." IT IS A COLLECTION OF WHAT A FEW FAMOUS PERSONAGES BELIEVE. A CURSORY LOOK THROUGH THAT POPULAR LITTLE BOOK REVEALS THE FACT THAT THERE IS A GOOD DEAL OF "I", MUCH USE OF THE WORD "BELIEVE" BUT VERY LITTLE "THIS". THE AVERAGE CONTRIBUTOR LINES UP IN FAVOR OF GOD, MOTHERHOOD, NATIVE LAND AND FREE ENTERPRISE, BUT BEYOND THAT HE IS VAGUE AND UNCOMMITTED. IT COMES OUT AS SUPERFICIAL TOLERANCE, INDIFFERENCE TO WHAT OTHERS BELIEVE, BECAUSE THE AUTHORS SEEM NEITHER TO KNOW OR CARE ABOUT WHAT THEY BELIEVE. IT IS A GOOD PICTURE OF THAT PARTICULAR AMERICAN PHENOMENON ("RELIGIONAT A DISTANCE," RELIGI- WITHOUT DECISION: AND IT SHOULD BE NO SURPRISE THAT SUCH RELIGION IS NOTORIOUSLY SENILE: PRODUCING NO REAL CHANGE, NOR HAVING ANY EFFECT ON THE WAY PEOPLE LIVE.

WHAT IS WRONG ESSENTIALLY WITH THIS BOOK, AND WITH AMERICAN RELIGION AT A DISTANCE IS THAT CHRISTIANITY IS NOT A CREED, A SET OF BELIEFS: IT IS PERSONAL COMMIT-MENT TO JESUS CHRIST. AND THAT COMMITMENT INVOLVES A VERY REAL AND VERY PERSONAL DECISION.

TO RETURN TO THE N.T.: WHEN MEN ENCOUNTERED JESUS CHRIST THEY WERE FORCED TO MAKE A DECISION. THE LAWYER WHO WISHED TO INVOLVE JESUS IN A LENGTHY DISCUSSION BY ASKING "WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR," FOUND HIMSELF ABRUPTLY IN A DECISION MAKING SITUATION.

THE QUESTION WAS NOT WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR, BUT WILL I, OR WILL I NOT BE A NEIGHBOR. THE RICH YOUNG MAN WANTED TO DISCUSS ETERNAL LIFE BUT WAS FORCED TOMAKE A DECISION. WOULD HE OBEY JESUS BY SELLING HIS GOODS OR NOT. NICODEMUS, WAS CONFUSED BY RE-BIRTH AND SUDDENLY FOUND THAT JESUS WAS NOT A PHILOSOPHER BUT THE CHIRST, WHO DEMANDED A DECISION OF HIM. THIS IS NO LESS IMPORTANT TODAY. IF CHRIST DOES NOT ENCOUNTER MEN TODAY, IF MEN DO NOT DECIDE ~~THEXX~~ THEN IT IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO CALL THIS THING N.T. CHRISTIANITY.

THERE IS NO NT. CHARACTER ~~THAT~~ WHO IS MORE REAL AND ALIVE THAN PETER. IN PETER WE SEE OUR OWN HIGH HOPES AND OUR STUMBLING AND FALLING. IN PETER WE SEE AN HONESTY, AN UNPRETENTIOUSNESS THAT MAKE US ADMIRE HIM. PETER EXPERIENCE WITH JESUS CHRIST IS ONE THAT WE MIGHT WELL CONSIDER AS WE THINK ABOUT THE NATURE AND NECESSITY OF CONVERSION. THAT EXPERIENCE BEGAN IN A SIMPLE ENCOUNTER. PETER AND HIS BROTHER ANDREW WERE FISHING. JESUS TOLD THEM TO FOLLOW HIM AND THEY OBEYED HIM. WHETHER THEY HAD EVER SEE N HIM BEFORE IS BESIDE THE POINT. THEY HEARD THE CALL OF CHRIST AND RESPONDED. THERE ARE TWO MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS ABOUT THIS ENCOUNTER THAT ARE IMPORTANT.-OR MORE ACCURATELY TWO CHRACTERISTICS THAT ARE ABSENT. FIRSTLY, THERE WAS NO SOUL WRETCHING CONVERSION: PETER NEITHER WEPT NO CRIED OUT. SECONDLY THERE WAS NO HESITANCY, PETER DID NOT SAY "LET ME THINK ABOUT IT FOR A LITTLE WHILE" HE DIDN'T ASK TO BE PERSUADED. HE DIDN'T TELL JESUS TO COME BACK IN A FEW DAYS FOR AN ANSWER. HE MERELY DROPPED

HIS NETS AND FOLLOWED. ALL PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS BREAK DOWN HERE, THERE ARE NO LOGICAL REASONS FOR PETER'S BEHAVIOR. HE HEARD AND RESPONDED. HE DID IT: AS AN ACT OF OBEDIANCE TO THE SON OF GOD. THIS THEN IS THE FIRST STEP OF CONVERSION. IT IS SIMPLY OBEYING THE CALL OF GOD, FOLLOWING PUTTING OUR LIVES AT HIS DISPOSAL. IT IS THROUGH AND THROUGH--AN ACT OF FAITH.

LEST WE STOP HERE, IT IS WISE TO FOLLOW PETER'S CAREER FARTHER. HE HAD FOLLOWED, DECIDED OR BEEN CONVERTED IF YOU WILL. AND YET HE DID MANY THINGS THAT DON'T SEEM APPROPRIATE FOR A MAN WHO HAS BEEN CONVERTED ONCE AND FOR ALL. IT WAS PETER, WHO INSISTED ON QUELLING HIS DOUBTS BY WALKING ON THE WATER. AND OF COURSE IT WAS PETER WHO DENIED JESUS THREE TIMES IN THE COURTYARD ON THE NIGHT BEFORE THE TRIAL. PETER WAS A DECISIVE MAN, HE HAD DECIDED FOR CHRIST. BUT HIS LIFE IS TESTIMONY THAT CONVERSION IS NEVER A ONE SHOT AFFAIR: IT IS A CONTINUAL PROCESS OF TURNING, DECIDING DAY AFTER DAY, HOUR AFTER HOUR.

IT IS EASY TO MISUNDERSTAND HERE: UNLIKE OUR MORE CONSERVATIVE BRETHREN, WE DON'T BELIEVE THAT A PERSONAL DECISION IS ALL THERE IS TO CHRISTIANITY. AS A MATTER OF FACT WE AFFIRM THAT THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO, OR DECIDE, THAT WILL EARN OUR SALVATION. BUT IN TENSION WITH THIS DOCTRINE IS THE FREEDOM OF WILL GOD HAS GIVEN US. WECAN'T SAVE OURSELVES, BUT WE CAN AND MUST DECIDE TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP.

JESUS SAID "I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK" AND IT IS OUR GOD GIVEN PEROGATIVE TO OPEN THE DOOR OR TO TURN AWAY. GOD CONVERTS US, MAKES US CHRISTIANS BUT WE MUST TAKE THE FIRST STEP.

BRING IT CLOSE TO HOME: WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP FOR US HERE AND NOW? IF YOU WANT TO FEEL THE WARM RAYS OF THE SUN YOU NATURALLY GO OUT OF DOORS AND STAND IN THE SUNSHINE. IF YOU WANT TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD, TO MAKE A DECISION TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS CONVERSION: YOU GO TO THE PLACE WHERE THE WORD OF GOD IS PROCLAIMED AND WHERE CHRIST, HIMSELF, CONFRONTS MANKIND, IN THE CHURCH. THIS IS THE FIRST STEP; IT IS YOURS TO MAKE.

CONVERSION IS NECESSARY TO CHRISTIANITY. THE CALL OF JESUS CHRIST NECESSITATES A PERSONAL ANSWER, YES LORD, OR NO LORD, THERE CAN BE NO MIDDLE GROUND. CHRIST ENCOUNTERS US EVERYDAY AND EACH DAY WE MUST MAKE THE DECISION ANEW. MAY GOD GRANT US HIS GRACE THAT WE MAY SEE CLEARLY, AND ACT BOLDLY, DECIDING FOR HIM AND FOR HIS CHRIST.